

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL THOMAS J. MCGRATH, COMMANDER, AFGHAN REGIONAL SECURITY INTEGRATION COMMAND -- SOUTH, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN TIME: 8:30 A.M. EDT DATE: TUESDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2007

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OSD PA): I think we've pretty much got everybody on the line here, sir. So welcome to the Blogger's Roundtable this morning, Colonel Thomas J. McGrath, who is the commander for the Afghan -- excuse me, the Afghan -- sir, I just keep screwing that up.

COL. THOMAS J. MCGRATH: Regional Security Integration Command.

MR. HOLT: Afghan Regional Security Integration Command -- South, out of Khandahar, Afghanistan, right? That's the (ARSIC ?) south. All right, sir, do you have an opening statement for us?

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, sure. I'd just like to give you kind of an update on what we've been doing. The war continues, and I think we have the Taliban in pretty bad shape. They lost thousands of fighters, thousands of fighters, in the last six months and they continue to lose more on a daily basis. They cannot stand and fight against us and are moving to more asymmetrical attacks: IEDs, rocket attacks, things of that nature.

It shows that they are not gaining the support of the local populace because they're losing sanctuaries in larger areas, areas like Khandahar and other major cities in the area. In addition, their attacks have dropped off in the past month. As I said, they're resorting to asymmetrical attacks and just plain, pure terror. About a week and a half ago they hung a 15 year old boy in public in a local village for carry 5 U.S. dollars on him. And as they were hanging him they stuffed the money in his mouth.

They're also murdering Afghans regularly as they attempt to destroy our supply convoys leading into Khandahar and other villages in our area. They'll shoot up the convoys but they also don't hesitate to shoot up civilians who are driving by in their own vehicles. We'll maintain our momentum. We figure this winter is very important.

We'll maintain our momentum during the upcoming winter by continuing ANA training, ANP training, that's Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police training. And sometime probably after the Spring we're expecting independent brigade-sized operations by the Afghan National Army. And my boss, Major General Cohn (sp), I think you've talked to him, is leading the charge by being the senior-most American general in charge of training for the ANA and the ANP, and also the equipping of these forces.

We just completed here in ARSIC-South, in conjunction with (ARSEA ?) South, which is led by the Brits, Major General Jack O'Page (sp), a corps-sized training exercise that was a huge success, a big step forward for the corps. We assisted the Afghans in the development and execution of independent combat operations. And the commanders and the staff performed brilliantly. We just went through a regular military decision-making process, command post exercise type event, and it went along really well.

The ANA is very aggressive. We said before, they're fearless. They're not afraid to engage the enemy in combat and they're not afraid to put their lives at risk. Coupled with the fact that we're teaching the senior leadership and mid-level leadership to operate at a higher level by doing corps-sized exercises, brigade-sized exercises, is a very good thing and gives me a lot of optimism.

The Afghan National Police continue to improve. We're in the process of organizing a more comprehensive training program that balances policing with counter-insurgency operations. (COINing ?), as we call it, is very important because you need the support of the people. And it can be kinetic, which is about 20, 25 percent, non- kinetic, which is about 75 percent.

We also are going to re-train the police, as I stated in the previous interview and we have a very good plan for doing that. And we're going to bring them in, like I said, balance them with policing and counter-insurgency tasks and then they'll be back in the field shortly and they'll be much better trained and much better qualified to meet and defeat the Taliban. Also we're aggressively pursuing construction projects throughout the region to include district centers, police

stations, schools, mosques, wells, medical outreach humanitarian assistance missions. We just did one this morning that went extremely well. So I'm very optimistic about the future in Afghanistan.

The winter is very important and we're not going to slow down. I think that we've got the Taliban on the run. We just need, as in any operation, when you have it you need to exploit what you have. You need to pursue. Although this isn't a linear operation, you pursue them and exploit them through the non-kinetic type things and some of the kinetic.

Okay? That's pretty much what I have for an opening statement. I'm ready for any questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, thank you very much. Andrew Rubin (ph), you were first on line.

MR. ANDREW RUBIN: Colonel, good afternoon. This is Andrew Rubin from U.S. Cavalry on point. Good to talk to you. I have kind of a multi-point question -- (inaudible) -- myself today. I just need a two-parter then. Sir, the Taliban seem to -- you said the Taliban is in bad shape. There seems to be no lack of Taliban recruits across the border from you in Pakistan. You seem to be -- as much as you kill them more keep pouring in. Could you speak a bit about the training with the Afghan Border Police, because they're the ones on the border ostensibly stopping these people from crossing?

COL. MCGRATH: Yes, we have a very large border police contingent. I won't go into the exact numbers, but I do have several police mentor teams down there training them. They're a very good force. We train them, again, in police activities, custom activities, but also in counter-insurgency and tactical type tasks: making contact, reacting to ambushes and ambushing and things of that nature.

It's a big border, a couple hundred miles, 500 plus if I'm not mistaken, and we're going to continue to grow the border police and also we're going to continue to send more mentors to the border areas to assist in their training. And it's very important in counter-insurgency that you control the borders and I think this is another area where we're pretty optimistic about things, that we're moving in the right direction.

MR. RUBIN: Were you able to stabilize the pay, because when I was over there in April they -- the BPs were complaining that they were paid around \$10, \$15. less than the equivalent ANAs and the ANPs?

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, that's another great story. Yes, we have. Through the assistance of the international community we've been able to increase the pay of the basic policeman from private to lieutenant and increase their pay by \$30. a month and bring that on up to par with some of the ANA and other local businesses and things of that nature. So that's a very positive step forward and it will also bring in a higher quality of recruit also, because of the increase pay, for the obvious reasons.

So this has just happened within the last 30 days and we're very excited about that and I'm sure we'll see the results as we do more recruiting for police over the next couple of months.

MR. RUBIN: Great, thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Christian.

MR. CHRISTIAN LOBE (SP): Good morning, Colonel, this is Christian Lobe from Military.com. I have sort of a two-part question here, more at the boots on the ground level. Why is it, do you think, that you have been able to target Taliban and anti-Afghan government forces en masse? Why are they massing?

We read these stories about large numbers killed. I think -- it used to be that, you know, during the Russian-Afghan war the only way they were able to mass is when they had the anti-aircraft capabilities so that they had, you know, they weren't targeted from the air. I mean, you talk about sort of desperation tactics, that seems like a lot more guts on their part to get a lot of people together for you to target. And then flying back up to 30,000 feet, with all these stories of large number of Taliban being targeted and killed, why is it, do you think, that the narrative coming out of Afghanistan still is a resurging Taliban?

COL. MCGRATH: Well, first of all I think they mass -- those are good questions, by the way -- I think they mass just because of ineptitude. In a counterinsurgency, in this type of war, when you mass against forces like us: Americans, Brits, Dutch, Canadians, Romanians, without

firepower we're able to destroy them quite easily, and we've shown that over the last six or seven months. And I think it happens because a lot of these guys are foreign fighters.

You know, a lot of their leadership is foreign fighters and they come in, they're not getting much support from the local people so they make this type of desperation attack to get some large spectacular attack against coalition forces. However, they can't do it because, you know, we have the stand-off with the ranges of our weapons systems. We have air, we have artillery, and I just think they're bringing in cohorts of young men who really don't know any better and are being led astray by the Taliban about all the great things that they're going to do. "Let's go off to war and kill Americans," and that sort of thing. It's been a colossal failure for them.

That's why they've been shifting to the asymmetrical attacks over the last couple of weeks. Partly, it's getting close to winter and it gets pretty darn cold up here, especially in the northern regions, but also they can't mass forces. I would love to have them mass a whole bunch of forces outside the gates here at Khandahar or somewhere else, because we would just bring (scunior ?) if you will, down upon them.

I really think it goes into just ineptitude on their part. I don't think they really know what they're doing. They're having a lot of infighting amongst themselves and they're just trying to get some type of spectacular attack before winter hits and they can go back with an IO message saying, "Oh look what we were able to do against the coalition forces," and somewhat destabilize the region.

But they've been very unsuccessful in doing that. What they've been able to do in various areas, as I said earlier, is just terrorize people and people are getting tired of it. And you can tell that because they don't have the local fighters.

Is there a resurgence of the Taliban? Yeah, there's a lot of fighters down here but I don't think it's the same type as we saw, you know, back in 2001. I think it's, like I said, they're coming from outside and they're just coming up here and getting killed.

And the other half of that, if you don't mind, I'll say is that's where we come in with the non-kinetic side and are able to say, "Hey, what have they done for you lately? They're forcing you to harbor them, to give them food, money. They're terrorizing you. Where have they built a hospital

for you, an aid station, a mosque, built ditches, irrigation ditches and wells and things of that nature?"

That's why this winter for us is going to be very critical that we continue with our reconstruction and development throughout the region and throughout the country. Does that answer your question?

MR. LOBE: Yeah it did, thanks. I have another if --

COL. MCGRATH: Sure, go ahead.

MR. LOBE: You know another problem, Colonel, that we've heard about -- actually several months ago. I don't know that I've heard that much about it recently, is the caveats that are imposed by the government of NATO troops that are over there assisting you and the rest of the coalition. To what extent have those -- have some of those caveats been lifted and what has the effect been on your operations in your area -- of those caveats?

COL. MCGRATH: Several nations do have caveats. I don't want to get into any details of them but frankly they have not impacted my operations in training, in growing the forces and then the operations that my guys, my imbedded training teams and my (police method ?) teams are involved with. I receive nothing but great support from the British, from the Canadians, the Dutch, Romanians in the area.

MR. LOBE: If I could just interrupt real quick, I mean, one of the examples we were given several months ago was exactly that, with training teams. And the example was a training team would be composed of mentors from a NATO country. That unit, that Afghan unit would be deployed by the government of Afghanistan to go somewhere to fight, and the trainers from a foreign -- from a NATO country would not be allowed by their government to travel with that unit. So you have to scramble around and find some mentors to go with that unit and they may not know the Afghan unit that well. You know, it was a very tough, sort of chemistry to reestablish. Has that not happened with you?

COL. MCGRATH: No, not at all. They're out there fighting. I look at the Brits, Canadians, the Dutch, who have their mentors in the field training with the Afghan forces. And they're out

there with them every day. I was just out with some Canadians the other day. They were in a small patrol base about -- I don't want to give the size, but not much bigger than a postage stamp, if you will.

MR. LOBE: Right.

COL. MCGRATH: Taliban, four or five hundred meters away, engaging with them on a regular basis. And the Canadians do have some caveats but it wasn't stopping them from engaging the Taliban, from patrolling and making a difference. Same thing with the British. They don't have too many, but they're out there fully engaged and just doing phenomenal work. And the Dutch are just coming on board.

Now all of these training teams have a relationship with myself, what we call (TRAINCOM ?). So we assist them and give them guidance with the training and the execution of the training, and never have I had anyone say they can't do anything. The OMLTs (ph), as they're called, Military Liaison Teams, are extremely important down here. And the more I get the better because I can get them down to lower echelons, you know, companies and platoons, and then we can turn up the level of training. So the Europeans and other nations around the world want to bid for these, there is definitely room for them down here. But again, to go back to the beginning, no, under no circumstances in the 5 months that I've been here have I seen the operational mentor and liaison team, that's OMLT, say that they can't do something.

MR. LOBE: Okay.

COL. MCGRATH: We've got some operations coming up where they are fully involved in the execution. They've been a great help and I'm very happy with their performance, their bravery, their aggressiveness and their toughness.

MR. LOBE: Okay, thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Andrew, you had a follow up?

MR. RUBIN: Yes, Colonel, Andrew Rubin again on point.

Sir, you were the chief of staff for the political, economic and military effects for MNFI back a couple of years ago. Can you speak in a bit more detail about the political and economic plans you have in place for your area now in Afghanistan?

COL. MCGRATH: Well yeah, it's using the commanders emergency response program, CERT money, to assist local communities and villages in upgrading their way of life, whether that's building well, schools, mosques. We use USAID money, some U.N. money also, but as far as the political side, you know, we'll go into the village and have a Shura, which is a gathering of the elders of the local village, and find out what they need, what they need for their community. And we'll work our way through that with them and we're able to allocate the monies for that.

Some of this stuff is just little things. You know, we're buying tools, seed, build a well, which isn't too hard to do, irrigation ditches and things of that nature. So it's a very inexpensive way of bringing up the quality of life of people in the area. And it's a very good way of reaching out and winning their hearts and minds, if you will, and letting them know that we offer a better future -- the government of Afghanistan offers them a better future for them than the Taliban will ever offer them.

We also give them village medical outreach programs, humanitarian assistance where we will send teams out of doctors and medics and things of that nature, and they'll come up literally in the thousands looking for medical assistance. And it's little things that just, you know, giving them pills for headaches to, you know, dentists -- dental issues, gastrointestinal issues, all kinds of things. But it's a great sign saying hey, we're doing this. The Taliban hasn't done this ever.

And we're making a difference with this and the government of Afghanistan is behind this and we put an Afghan face on it. We make sure their ANA and ANP are there and some of their doctors there in assisting and say this is what you need. This is the way ahead for you, not aligned with the Taliban and their terrorism and their backwards way of doing things.

MR. RUBIN: Sir, how do things just get so blown out of proportion? The other day in the news they had this big thing where the Army is denying that a couple PFCs tore up a Koran in



somebody's house. We're giving out tools and building schools and fixing the place up and this alleged incident is what makes the news. Is their media that much better than ours?

COL. MCGRATH: I think it's our media, isn't it? I don't know who put that story out. I had heard about it. I don't know the details. But hey, you know, doctor heal yourself, I guess. I mean you guys are more than welcome to come over here and imbed with me any time you want. And you can put out the good news and I'll take you anywhere and I'll let you go anywhere and do anything, as long as you don't get killed. And you can see the good things that have happened.

I don't know about this story. I don't know why, you know -- I guess it's, you know, it's not the dog bites man but man bites dog type thing. I guess they're looking for sensational type things but I don't see that amongst my soldiers. I don't know anything about that happening.

We regret it happened but there are so many good things that are going on and there's a very good future here, an optimistic future for Afghanistan. I'm real excited about it. So, I don't know, maybe you guys can tell me why you -- those type of folks jump on those stories. I'm really not sure.

MR. RUBIN: Okay. We're not sure either because we're trying to get -- (inaudible) -- people pissed off at us, at this point.

MR. HOLT: All right. Any other follow-up questions?

MR. RUBIN: Colonel, Andrew Rubin again. Do you have a picture you can send to Jack Holt, because I'm going make my feature tomorrow Afghanistan and what we're talking about today. Do you got a current picture of something in the field -- (inaudible) -- couple Taliban who are no longer with us even better.

COL. MCGRATH: I can get you a picture of me in the field. I'll have Steve send that to you -- (inaudible). We've got a couple we can send you of some of our outreach programs and things like that.

MR. RUBIN: That'd be great.

COL. MCGRATH: If you'd like that.

MR. RUBIN: We've got this all on (third quarter ?) so I'm going to take you up on your offer a private (imbed ?).

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much, Col. Thomas J. McGrath, commander -- see if I get this right this time -- Afghan Regional Security, Integration Command -- South. The ARSIC-South, Khandahar, Afghanistan. Thank you very much for being with us and we'll speak again hopefully here in another month or so. COL. MCGRATH: Okay, great. And like I said, I appreciate it. This is a great forum to get the word out and I appreciate what you guys are doing back there in getting good stories out, and true stories out too. I don't look at this as, you know, propaganda or anything like that so --

MR. LOBE: Hey Colonel, this is Christian Lobe again. What is your title in English? Are you the head of the Afghan army and police training in the south, or something? How do I put this --

COL. MCGRATH: Yes, I'm the commander of ARSIC, which we train the police and the army.

MR. LOBE: Okay, thanks.

COL. MCGRATH: Okay?

MR. HOLT: All right.

COL. MCGRATH: One last thing, go Red Sox, right?

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you very much, Colonel, and look forward to speaking with you again.

END.